

A Coal Miner's Kid Turned Professor

by Dick Jensen

During my seventy-five years I have lived an interesting life that bridged the gap between a blue collar family and a professional career in higher education. I was born into a coal mining family in Utah, went to college to become a teacher, earned a Ph.D., and taught at the university level for thirty years. I am financially comfortable, married to a beautiful, intelligent woman, have a talented daughter, and am the grandfather of two intelligent and creative young women.

Yet, I still have questions about my life. At times I have felt as though I didn't deserve to have such a fulfilling life. I didn't understand those feelings but discovered that other individuals had similar concerns when I read a book called Limbo by Alfred Lubrano. In that book Lubrano details the results of interviews he held with individuals who grew up in working class families and then became successful professionals. Lubrano labels people like me as Straddlers, individuals who live between two worlds and are not comfortable in either.

I was raised in Spring Glen, a rural community of about 400 people two miles south of Helper (population 2,000) and five miles north of Price (population 8,000) in Carbon County, Utah. Carbon County was a unique part of Utah. Because of the plentiful jobs for miners and workers on the railroad the county attracted large numbers of immigrants from Great Britain, Eastern Europe, Greece, Italy, and Mexico. In a reflection of the diversity of its people, the county had a strong Catholic Church, a large Greek Orthodox community, and many Protestant groups in addition to members of the Mormon Church. The Mormon Church had less influence in Carbon County than any other region of the state. The county had many bars that offered liquor by the drink (in violation of state laws) and gambling. Prostitution was legal. Politics in the region were dominated by the United Mine Workers and the Democratic Party. Most of the rest of the state was strongly Republican.

My family members were not strong Mormons even though my ancestors were Mormon converts who came to Utah in 1866 from Sweden. After they arrived in Utah there was some sort of conflict with the Mormon Church and the family rejected Mormonism. My dad did not belong to any religion. My mother grew up in a Mormon family but was not active in the religion. My younger sister was a devout Mormon but the rest of us were not. I was active in the church during some periods of my life but I left completely in the 1960s. I became a Catholic when I married Carol. Several of my nieces and nephews have also become Catholics.

My father was a coal miner who quit school after the eighth grade. My mother graduated from South Emery High School, a small school in Ferron, a community about 40 miles south of Spring Glen.

My mother was unable to go attend college, She was born into a poor family with nine children so there was no money for higher education. She grew up on a farm in Clawson, Utah, but her father worked in the Hiawatha mine about 40 miles away. After graduating from high school she got a job doing house work and tending children in Hiawatha. My father was also working there. They were married about a year after they met. I was the third of their five children.

My father and uncles built our family home. My parents inherited money from my dad's eccentric bachelor uncle. They bought an empty house in one of the many mining camps in the area, tore it down, and used the materials to build our small, two-bedroom family home. A few years later a third bedroom was added in the basement for my two brothers and me.

Although my father worked in the Castle Gate mine, we did not live in a mining camp. My family owned a small farm several miles from the mine. My older brother and I had to milk a cow and feed the pigs, chickens, and rabbits. In the summer we were responsible for the care of a large garden. All of us helped our mother can dozens of jars of fruits and vegetables. Our family never had much money but we always ate very well.

Miners believed in the value of education. Several of them said to me, "an education is important. It's the only thing they can't take away from you." Much of my desire to go to college grew out of this cultural belief in the value of education.

Even though my parents were not readers and there were few books in our home, I have always loved to read. My family subscribed to the *Salt Lake Tribune* and *Life Magazine* which I read avidly. My junior high and high school both had libraries that I frequented.

Most of my reading was done in our bedroom. I would lie on my bed with my head propped up on pillows. I would often get so involved in my book that I would refuse to be interrupted. If my parents tried to interrupt my reading I would ignore them or tell them to leave me alone. Eventually they gave up and let me read until I was finished.

At each stage of my education I was blessed to have teachers and mentors who saw potential in me. Many of my teachers had grown up in Carbon County and then returned to teach in the school district.

I attended elementary school in Spring Glen. Most of my classmates' fathers either worked in the mines or on the railroad so we were from similar economic and social backgrounds.

My first grade teacher, Miss Buchanan, had been my father's teacher. She encouraged my interest in learning but the teacher who had the most effect was my second and third grade teacher, Mrs. Hunter. She told my parents that I had a fine mind and she inspired me to work hard. Interestingly, she was the daughter of the governor of Utah. He was a Democrat who had been raised in Price.

As a kid I was always interested in baseball. When I was ten I began playing Little League baseball. I was a first baseman. When I was twelve I made the all-star team. Two years later I was a Pony League all-star. Baseball was the major sport among coal miners so it was an honor to be an all-star.

At Helper Junior High and Carbon High School I was fortunate to have Floyd O'Neill, who grew up in Price, as a history teacher. He was a brilliant man who mentored several of us that he believed had potential. He encouraged us but he got very angry if we disappointed him. O'Neill later became a professor at the University of Utah.

In junior high I discovered competitive speech events. One of my teachers asked me to enter the speech contest between junior high schools (there were four in the county). I won a small medal (which I still have) for finishing in third place in extemporaneous speaking.

My interest in debate grew in high school. Neil Warren, who like me grew up in Spring Glen, was an outstanding debate coach and drama teacher. My partner and I did very well in competition throughout the state. In addition to debate, I was a member of the choir and had a singing role in the school musical. I often wondered what my family thought about my interest in debate and drama.

In 1961 I turned eighteen so I was old enough to volunteer to work in the coal mine owned by the Mormon Church. Those eight hours in the mine were interesting but I remember thinking at the end of the shift, "Well, I have been in a coal mine and I never want to go back."

In 1961 I enrolled at Carbon Junior College in Price. At that time an increasing number of students from working class families were able to attend college and become professionals. I had received a four-year scholarship from the state of Utah that paid my tuition. The state created the scholarships to encourage men to teach in the public schools.

Mr. Warren had moved to the college to be the debate coach and teach drama classes. My advisor and mentor was Charles Peterson, a history professor. I was on the debate team, had a major role in *The Taming of the Shrew*, and was a student body officer my sophomore year. During my freshman year I worked in a gas station and then got a job on KOAL radio during my sophomore year.

In 1963 I moved to Weber State College. In my first months at Weber State I was active in drama and on the debate team but I quit both because I had to get a job to pay my college expenses. A friend on the debate team helped me obtain a job at KVOG radio

Before I left home my mother made it clear to me that she would be very disappointed if I ever forgot where I came from once I became successful. At the time I didn't understand her concern but she must have known of cases where people forgot their roots. I vowed that I would never forget mine.

After graduating from Weber State I got a job teaching in my home county. I saw myself as being like the title character in the television show, *Welcome Back Kotter*. My goal was to return to my home town and teach kids like myself. I worked at East Carbon Junior High, a school located in a mining camp about 30 miles from where I grew up. It was a small school and I was the only English teacher. Two older teachers served as my mentors.

In the fall of 1966 I moved to Kearns High School on the west side of the Salt Lake Valley. I was hired as the debate coach and speech teacher mainly because my background was similar to the students in the school—many of their parents worked in the large open pit copper mine in Bingham Canyon. In my three years at Kearns I built a very successful debate team.

In 1969 I entered the graduate program at the University of Arizona. I planned to earn an M.A. and teach at a community college. My mind was changed by two dynamic young professors, Andrew King and Floyd Douglas Anderson. King directed my thesis on the labor radical William Dudley "Big Bill" Haywood. Both my thesis and dissertation were on labor unions as were many of my academic publications. My research was an attempt to bridge the gap between my academic and mining worlds.

King and Anderson encouraged me to attend Indiana University for my Ph.D. At Indiana James R. Andrews was my advisor and directed my dissertation on the 1972 election in the United Mine Workers. I also met my wife at Indiana University.

In 1974 I accepted a position as a Visiting Assistant Professor at Humboldt State University in Arcata, California. During my two years at Humboldt I was fortunate to have older professors who encouraged and mentored me. I also began my role as a mentor to students. My daughter, Mary Kay, was born during the time we lived in Arcata.

In 1976 I accepted a tenure-track position at the University of New Mexico. I worked at UNM until 1992 when I was hired at UNLV. By 1992 I was a senior professor of Communication with a significant publication record. At UNLV I continued my research and expanded my work as a mentor. In recognition of my effectiveness in advising graduate students I received an award as

the Outstanding Graduate Advisor in the university. I also served as an administrator for four years: Senior Advisor to the President and later Associate Dean of the Honors College.

I was fortunate that I chose a career that allowed me to continue reading. I often joked that I was paid to do just what I would do anyway. I cannot imagine a more fulfilling career.

During my years as a teacher and professor I taught between eight and ten thousand students. My academic writings included a dozen books, more than fifty articles and book chapters, and many papers that were presented at academic conferences. I directed or served on more than one hundred thesis and dissertation committees. Additionally, I won awards for my teaching and scholarship and was elected to leadership positions in professional organizations.

When I retired I vowed that I would spend a great deal of time reading. I have kept that vow. Much of my day is spent reading in a very comfortable chair in my office/guest bedroom. Most of the books that I read come from the library but I also buy books from Amazon and have a Kindle loaded with books.

When I am reading I usually am able to focus on only one book at a time. Because I am a fast reader I often I finish a book in two days. I am able to read long books in 4 or 5 days.

Even though I was successful at each stage of my career, I have always considered myself a coal miner's kid from Carbon County. I was fortunate that education allowed me a chance to escape from the world where I grew up. I had opportunities and I took them.

A few years ago my mother said to me, "I'm proud of you for many things but I'm proudest that you never forgot where you came from." I don't think my family ever understood my life as a university professor but they took pride in my accomplishments.

In many ways my life has been a confirmation of the hopes and dreams of my parents, my teachers, and my mentors. In turn I have encouraged many students to become successful in law, academics, and other professions. I feel blessed that I can look back on such a fulfilling life.



1949-1950 Spring Glen Elem.

